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SUBJECT: TURKEY: WIDESPREAD DROUGHT IN SOUTHEAST COMPOUNDING ECONOMIC  
HARDSHIPS

Summary

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¶1. (U) The Tigris and Euphrates basins in Turkey's heavily Kurdish southeastern region are suffering from the worst drought in a generation, pushing many poor farmers to abandon their villages in desperation due to shortages of water and animal feed. The agriculture minister recently announced a program to assist affected farmers, but many fear that red tape and delays will prolong the agony and compound already severe economic problems in the region. The politically astute AKP government will likely respond more generously as the planned 2009 local elections approach, but in the meantime the crisis is adding to the population of poor, disaffected migrant Kurds in the cities of southeastern Turkey. End summary.

No Rain, No Gain

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¶2. (U) The rolling hills and rocky plains of the Tigris-Euphrates watershed produce olives, wheat, lentils, cotton and livestock. Though large cities such as Diyarbakir have some industry, agriculture and food processing remain the backbone of the regional economy. Due to the region's isolation, low education levels and chronic political instability, the conditions in many villages remain primitive, with peasants tilling small plots of land (owned or leased) just above the subsistence level.

¶3. (U) The hardest hit region in this year's drought is between the Tigris and Euphrates (including the provinces of Gaziantep, Kilis, Sanliurfa, Mardin, Sirnak, Batman, Diyarbakir, Adiyaman and Elazig), where precipitation is down by over 75%. Even some crops under irrigation have been unable to grow because the soil is too dry or the weather was so hot early in the season that vegetation was scorched.

¶4. (SBU) Huseyin Arslan, the chairman of Turkey's largest legume trading company, painted a dire picture of conditions in the

region. The red lentil crop, he told us, has declined from over half a million tons in 2007 to just 60,000 tons this year, causing the price to double. The price is likely to climb even higher because lentils are a staple during Ramazan, which starts in early September. Arslan said imports from North America will not be harvested in time for the holiday. He added that the trauma of this year's drought will continue for several years because farmers will not have sufficient amounts of seed to plant next year.

15. (SBU) Wheat and barley production in the region has also declined by as much as 90%, leading to a spike in the price of barley, which is a staple feed source for livestock. While well-off farmers are able to survive from savings or loans, press reports suggest that thousands of poor farmers - especially those practicing animal husbandry - are being forced to abandon their homes and move to the cities to live with relatives and seek employment there. Nurcan Baysal, the director of a rural development NGO that works with four villages in Diyarbakir province, said many poor families are heart-broken because they can't afford to feed their animals and end up selling them off to move to the city. But, she added, the money they have will run out in a few months and create more unemployment and social problems in the urban centers. Arslan echoed this, noting that when families are forced to sell their milking cow because they can't feed her, times are truly desperate.

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16. (U) Media reports confirm that the hardest-hit regions are seeing a mass exodus from dry villages, though overall figures have not been published. All but four families have left a 50-family village in Mardin because of the poor harvest and spiraling debts. In several villages in Batman province, people are depending on trucked-in water because the wells are dry and the water table is lower so drilling to reach it has become more expensive, costing 100,000 to 200,000 YTL.

#### Government Response

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17. (U) On July 19, the Agriculture ministry announced a relief program for wheat, barley and pulse growers who have lost more than 30% of their crop. The compensation is between 13 and 30 YTL per decare and is intended to provide farmers with sufficient cash to purchase seeds for next season. There are also provisions for debt postponement from the state-owned Ziraat ("agriculture") Bank and agricultural cooperatives. The head of an agricultural cooperative in Sanliurfa, however, was quoted saying that the debt-relief provisions are inadequate because about 80% of farmers' debt is with private banks, so will not be deferred.

18. (SBU) Arslan complained that he had talked with Agriculture Minister Eker and prepared a report for him in May, but the government only announced an assistance program in mid-July. Baysal agreed that the assistance is coming too late because hundreds of people have already been forced to sell their livestock and move to the city. She noted that her organization is active in lobbying the local government authorities to provide help and assists farmers in accessing aid. But she noted that others don't have such assistance, "The villagers need help, but in many of these areas the government is not active and we are the only NGO doing rural development so there

is no other help."

¶9. (U) In May, PM Erdogan announced his plan to complete by 2012 the Southeast Anatolian Project (GAP) - which calls for quadrupling the amount of land under irrigation and improving other infrastructure - but that program will not provide any short-term relief from the drought.

Comment

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¶10. (SBU) The AKP government has been successful in courting farmers in southeastern Turkey with its infrastructure investments and anti-poverty programs, though its popularity throughout the region has suffered in recent months due to its perceived lack of sympathy on the Kurdish issue. The government's late response to the drought probably resulted from political distractions in Ankara and concerns about maintaining budget discipline. As the local elections are scheduled for March (but could be held sooner), many contacts expect that the relief packages for farmers will be increased.

¶11. (SBU) The human cost of the drought, in the form of thousands more people involuntarily moved from villages to the cities, is a vivid reminder that the rural areas in southeastern Turkey remain over-populated and under-developed. While the recently announced initiative to re-energize the GAP will improve agricultural productivity in the long term, the major challenge is to generate employment opportunities for the legions of job-seekers who will continue to move to the cities.  
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